

MORTIMER'S FAILURE

By Jesse Lynch Williams

ILLUSTRATION BY F. C. VOHN



THE extraordinary plot against Mortimer Billings's wife was planned and executed by Billings himself; but Sharpe was responsible for it, Sharpe, the famous neurologist, upon whom the husband, in desperation, had called late one afternoon, following a hard day, by no means unsuccessful, in Wall Street.

ACT I

"THE whole secret of your wife's trouble," said the physician glibly, a dapper little man, with an engaging smile and mild blue eyes—but they saw everything—"lies in the simple fact that she has everything and does nothing." He paused to see what the husband thought of that.

"Humph," said Billings. He did not think much of it.

"And such a departure from the natural state," the famous physician continued imperturbably, "namely, that of having nothing and doing everything, is entirely too

wide for any product of nature to stand, even the most civilized. It is abnormal. It is wrong. Hence it brings its victims to an abnormal condition of mind and body, illustrating one of the phases of what I call, borrowing the nomenclature of another science, 'the point of diminishing returns' of civilization."

"But what I left my office early to-day to find out," interrupted the husband, "is what is the matter with my wife." Billings was a busy man, a practical man, a man of large affairs; he did not seem to hang upon the utterances of physicians, even famous specialists, with the awed respect manifested by the latter's female callers.

"And I am telling you," returned Sharpe blandly, for he in turn was not particularly impressed by the presence of a famous capitalist; he dealt largely in men of affairs, quite as many of his patients being men who did too much as women who did too little. "There is, I assure you, Mr. Billings, nothing in the world seriously the matter with your wife—*except* the most serious thing imaginable in a world made by and



Drawn by F. C. Yohn.

Mrs. Ellings's husband had not enjoyed hauling dirt.—Page 191.

for work. Effort, struggle, absorption in something outside of oneself; it is the law of this whirling universe." He paused impressively. "Mr. Billings, your wife is breaking that law every moment of her idle existence." Then he smiled and added, with a good-fellow manner, which the other liked better: "Of course, I can turn on a shower of technical terms, if you prefer, about hypochondriacs, neurasthenia, and all that. But *you*, I thought, would like the simple truth."

"Cut out the technical terms," said Billings, also smiling a little. "Only the truth is, my wife hasn't a lazy bone in her body. There are plenty of things she wants to do—if she were only well enough."

"On the contrary," corrected the famous specialist, shaking his head authoritatively, "she would be well enough if she only had to do them—whether she wanted to or not."

With this he paused, and genially returned Billings's scrutiny, each taking the other's measure of personality, so to speak, each respecting the other a little more, perhaps.

The physician proceeded: "Now if your wife only had a half dozen children to worry about—"

"As there are no children," interrupted Billings, "suppose we leave them out of the question." He turned his gaze out of the window. It was a sore point; Billings was a fat, domestic man.

The mild blue eyes took in all this. Also the neurologist perceived that he had to do with a devoted husband; this always complicated a case unfortunately. "Your wife," resumed the physician more sympathetically, "has an active mind."

"She has a splendid mind," emphasized the husband.

"Precisely; but of the type which, when not drawn out upon something else, turns in upon itself, like millstones which have no grist to grind."

"And what I want to know," insisted the man of action, "is what I'm going to do about it. I've tried travel, baths, X-rays, massage, vibration, osteopathy—I've even tried Christian Science and mental healing. I have done everything for her!"

"Ah, Mr. Billings, that is just it," returned the physician; "you've done everything for her—what has she done for you?"

"For me?" repeated the husband, as if puzzled. "Didn't she marry me?"

It came out so naively, and the implication was so clearly, "Isn't that enough?" that the physician answered it. "No," he said, with his engaging smile; "permit me to express the opinion that it is *not* enough; and there is no place on earth where it is considered enough, except here in this big, boyish, overgrown, newly rich nation you and I are so proud of. Look at the large responsibilities of a French family; look at the exacting duties of an English lady—social exactions they may be, enjoyable they sometimes are, but she has to get up out of bed and meet them." The physician emphasized this with a slap on his desk.

"My wife," returned Billings, "has too much intelligence, too fine a spirit to be satisfied with a social career. She long since tired of the game."

"Precisely; and was not compelled by circumstances, hers or yours, to keep it up whether satisfied or not. In this country unfortunately, a woman's career has little or nothing to do with her husband's. Social life is merely a game to throw over at will if it doesn't amuse. Well," he added inquiringly, "she next took up fads, I presume."

"O Lord! all sorts of fads," smiled Billings. The two men were now getting along very well together.

"And abandoned each in turn when the novelty wore off?"

Billings hesitated. "She could not help laughing at the strenuousness of her fellow-faddists," was his way of putting it.

"I see," said the expert, "and there was no way of compelling her to follow up her fads, whether absurd or not?"

"Doctor," said Billings whimsically, "I could hardly compel her to lilt Irish poetry unless she felt like it."

"Quite so," said the physician, smiling; and then after a pause: "Mr. Billings, your wife, before her marriage—had she not been thrown on her own resources at one time?"

Billings explained that when she was about twenty years old her father had failed and died; she, like the plucky girl she was, had sprung into the breach with much of father's former spirit, and had supported, not only herself, but her broken-hearted mother. "I had known her father, and this was what first called my attention to her," said Billings, sighing at the recollec-

tion of the animated loveliness, the energetic grace, the efficient poise of the radiant girl he had wooed. "For a while she wanted to keep on with her work. That was my most serious rival." Billings laughed consciously. "But of course I wouldn't hear of it," he added.

"Why not?" Sharpe asked it in the most matter-of-fact manner.

Billings looked up to see whether he was really in earnest; he seemed to be. "Why, doctor," was the reply, "she's my wife."

The physician opened his mouth to answer, but closed it again and merely looked professionally inscrutable, a look which even the youngest members of his profession acquire early in their careers. He knew how powerless was science when pitted against sentiment. Was it worth while trying any longer to convince this generous, hard-working American husband that his conception of a spouse's duty toward his wife was as thoughtlessly cruel in practice as it was thoughtfully kind in intention? And yet this good man considered himself "practical," prided himself upon bringing his mate all the benefits of an enlightened civilization! In effect, the relations of this pair were neither practical nor civilized—so it seemed to this man of science, who kept an eye on other sciences than his own. The instinct of protection remained from a rougher age; but reciprocal responsibilities on the part of the woman had been smoothed away now that the age and their circumstances were no longer rough. Consequently, in the case of this wife, since nothing in the way of any other duty had been substituted, the resulting relation was more like that of a man and his mistress than a marriage of equals in a highly organized state of society, facing the world together as life partners, dividing the burdens and problems as well as sharing the luxuries of existence. The chief difference (from every point of view except religion and sociology) was that the so-called moral relation was a good deal worse—this woman was not impelled to exert herself to retain her luxuries; they were her legal rights, not merely his devoted favors. So it was no wonder that life together was becoming rather a wreck. Also it was no wonder that the scientist had closed his mouth abruptly, and now took another tack.

"Mr. Billings, during these last three

years," he inquired, for he found the Socratic method the best for handling practical men accustomed to doing their own thinking, "since your wife became an invalid has she never come out from her mist of self-absorption, her nervous inertia?"

"Frequently," Billings assured him; "but less frequently each year."

"Symptomatic," nodded the physician; "but I mean, more than for those brief periods. Has she ever given signs of coming all the way out? Of being her old, efficient self, able to make decisions without worrying, vigorous, buoyant, happily active?"

"Yes, once," Billings hesitated. "When her mother died. Sounds strange, I suppose."

"To you, perhaps—not to me."

"But—I have never seen a more devoted daughter. She had supported her mother, you know; and that had brought them very close together. I thought it would kill her."

"And instead it made her live, for the time being?"

"Well, I thought she was merely showing her nerve and would collapse after the funeral; but no, that girl still insisted upon overseeing everything herself. She wouldn't even let me attend to the notes of acknowledgment; I can see her now, writing away with the tears rolling down her cheeks, leaning back so they wouldn't drop on the paper—she writes very individual notes. She even took a hand in designing the lettering on the vault—she has an artistic bent, you know—and through the whole thing she somehow seemed not only well and strong, but, in a certain sense, though broken-hearted, she seemed——"

"Happy?"

"Well, I wouldn't like to say happy exactly."

"No; of course you wouldn't; we are all such conventional cowards. We often think ourselves unnatural when we are only natural."

"Humph," said Billings sardonically; "if her mother's taking away could do all that, I suppose you will tell me next that her husband's death would affect a permanent cure."

"By no means, Mr. Billings. A serious illness on your part might go a long way toward it, but I fear a widow of yours would be left entirely too solvent to recover. On the contrary, she would relapse after a little

into a more permanent patient than ever; unless," added the expert, "her second husband married her for her money and developed into a scamp, an invalid, or—a father."

Billings remarked parenthetically that he had not expressed any immediate intention of dying for his wife. "Ah," pursued the physician, with the gleam of an idea in his eyes, "but you *would* be willing to make a few sacrifices—to give up a few luxuries?"

"What are 'luxuries' to me? Country places I can't use—too far from your office, sir; a yacht I dare not sail—she worries about me; horses I can't ride; cars I can't drive; and a home—well, doctor, if you cure my wife you can have my house for a hospital; it's practically one already."

"But I can't cure your wife," returned Sharpe suddenly.

"Then you give it up, after all?"

"But you can."

"If how can I?"

"You won't do it, though. I've tried other husbands."

"You might try me," said Billings.

The doctor leaned forward. "Jump over to the wrong side of the market—smash your business—fail!"

The two men confronted each other a moment in silence. Presently Billings, convinced by the other's eye that he actually meant the thing he said, smiled indulgently. "Doctor," he remarked, "you don't realize what you are proposing."

"Mr. Billings," was the reply, "I realize that there is one thing even the most devoted husbands are more devoted to than their wives—their work."

"It's my life," said Billings.

"It's your wife's death," said the physician; "her living death."

The financier opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again somewhat after the manner of the man of science a few moments before—and, curiously enough, for a not dissimilar reason. He felt the futility of explaining to this well-meaning but narrow-minded specialist the consequences of the stupendous act of folly and wickedness he proposed. No matter what Billings might say, the physician would believe that the mere loss of money, of power, of prestige, caused the hesitancy. What could this impractical little man who dealt in death and disease know of the consequence to others of the failure of Mortimer Billings.—the

large interests involved, the half-finished undertakings, the great dreams and plans for opening up new sections of the country, the development of vast industries, and the wreck and ruin that would be caused by such a chimerical decision, such quixotic action? The physician considered himself a humanitarian, and doubtless there was much to his credit on that score, thought Billings; but he did all his work on individual organisms, and so did not consider the point of view of humanity at large. Every specialized vision of life, whether commercial, scientific, or artistic, has its blind-spot.

"Doctor," said Billings, with a gesture of impatience, "what you propose is absurd. It's out of the question."

"Mr. Billings," said the other, quickly assuming the jocular note; "that is my only prescription. But it will cure."

"Doctor," said the caller, suavely responding to the jocular; "that may be true; but I'll be damned if I do it," and he arose to go.

"And, Mr. Billings," replied the physician accompanying him to the door, "you'll be damned if you don't. So there we are—where we started out! I perceive that I shall continue to have the pleasure of treating Mrs. Billings. I bid you good afternoon, sir," and they parted with unexpressed sentiments of mutual contempt, as the next caller was shown in.

ACT II

MRS. BILLINGS and her appendages occupied the floor above the beautiful but now useless Empire drawing-room. The carefully selected chintzes of her boudoir, like the wall coverings of the rest of her suite, had been removed, because she could not stand the irrevocable recurrence of designs. Dull-colored cartridge paper had been substituted for a while; but the regularity of the joints where the rolls slightly overlapped soon attracted attention to themselves and got on her nerves, so in turn the paper was scraped off and the bare walls were tinted a neutral gray, which served the purpose rather well, except for a speck or two, which she tried to endure with fortitude. All the pictures and "pretty things" which she had once cherished had made way for glass-topped tables and white enam-

eled affairs, like a hospital. Nearly all the furnishings were washable, and gave forth a faint odor of carbolic acid. The thought of germs was one of the things which got on the poor lady's nerves.

Noises, naturally, were another. There were double doors, somewhat like those of a telephone booth, and double-sashed windows, hermetically sealed to keep out the noise and germs of the street. Billings had installed, at great expense, the most modern fresh-air system of flues, the air being drawn down from the roof to the basement, screened through silk, warmed over one set of coils or cooled over another, according to the automatic thermostat, which worked without any audible click. When Billings, who was usually allowed to visit his wife once a day, sometimes twice, wanted to light his cigar he had to go downstairs to strike a match. This was not much of a hardship, because, as his wife pointed out, he could always light his first one before starting upon the expedition to her rooms, and his second from the first, the stump of number one being escorted from the apartment by a maid summoned by the nurse. The difficult problem was to get into the room without startling Mrs. Billings, who couldn't stand being startled. Entering the room silently without being announced was very bad; knocking on the door was, of course, worse. So Billings had installed a silent indicator upon which the nurse was accustomed to gaze at certain agreed-upon hours. Then she would say, in a very soft, unstartling voice, "Mr. Billings is now entering the elevator on the ground-floor, and will be standing outside of the door in a moment. Shall I let him in?"

This afternoon—it was a few minutes after his talk with the physician—Mrs. Billings let him in at once. Sometimes he was allowed to wait a while and look at the blank walls of the hall. This time he had kept the nurse waiting staring at the annunciator for nearly an hour, while his wife became nervous.

"Mortimer! how could you?" she began chidingly in the thin, spiritless drawl of the expert invalid, her eyelids drooping. "Why didn't you tell me you were going to be late? I was so upset I couldn't take my nap." One could see that she was very sorry for herself, and anyone but the man who loved her would have been exasper-

ated with her. She had a wan beauty in the delicate regularity of feature, and he was sorry for her, too. That had been one of the great troubles—he was too sympathetic and indulgent.

Mortimer had closed the door softly, and now crossed the room with the quiet step he had learned by experience to adopt. "I was unavoidably detained, Clara, dear."

"Not at the office?"

"Yes, at the office." He did not say whose office.

His wife looked more offended. "Miss Hudson telephoned twice; they said you had gone! I think it's outrageous! You must have that telephone girl discharged to-morrow."

"Very well, dear; very well," said Mortimer abstractedly, for he had something on his mind.

"I kept seeing them bear your dead body home on a stretcher. It was terrible. It has put me back three days." She was fond of her husband and leaned upon him.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Billings," put in Miss Hudson, the nurse, cheerily—perhaps because leaving the room for her hour's relaxation out of doors.

"You don't know anything about it, Miss Hudson," said the invalid, and added to her husband as the door, very softly, closed. "That woman is like a stone; she's not in the least sympathetic or interested in me."

"I'll speak to her," said Mortimer abstractedly.

"Oh, no, no, no; you would be sure to hurt her feelings. Promise me you won't."

"All right, then, I won't speak to her."

"Mortimer, you're keeping something from me," his wife resumed irritably; "you know how it puts me back to be teased."

"Clara, dear," he replied in a grave manner, "prepare yourself."

"Now, Mortimer! don't tell me any bad news—I can't stand anything more to-day," she declared positively.

"I'm afraid you'll have to, Clara."

"You're not going to take me South again? I won't go." She seemed almost in a panic about it.

"It's worse than that, Clara."

"Mortimer!" She was now feeling her pulse. "Your sister is coming to visit us again!"

"No, my dear," he replied with a slight

smile; "there's no danger of her wanting to come here again."

"Then what is it, Mortimer! Don't you see how you're upsetting me? Can't you think of me a little?"

"Clara, have you read the evening papers?"

"You know I never read the horrid papers."

He did know it; he was relying upon it. "I'm afraid you must this time." He brought forth the *Evening Post*.

"Don't," she shuddered; "don't let it rustle!"

"Look at this: P. and H. has dropped eight points. Do you know what that means to me?" As a matter of fact and financial history it meant that Billings and his associates had at last secured the long-desired outlet for their ore, but Mortimer was an experienced bluffer.

The expression on his face startled her out of her supine self-absorption. She suddenly sat up, rigidly erect. "Quick, what is it?" she cried.

"It means," he declared in low, measured tones, simulating despair, "that I am on the wrong side of the market—that my business is smashed! That I have failed, am ruined!"

He turned his face away as if to hide his grief, though really it was to avoid the look of horror in her wide-open eyes. He retreated across the room, flung himself upon a lounge, and buried his face in his hands, muttering in broken accents: "My dreams, my half-finished undertakings—gone, all gone! My life is wrecked!"

Bedridden patients who have not touched foot to the floor in months have been known in case of fire to rush to the rescue of their children; it was with this same primal instinct, the maternal instinct of protection, that Mortimer Billings's wife flew across the room to her prostrate spouse, gathered his poor, bowed head to her bosom, and thinking now only of him, cried in vibrant tones: "My poor, dear boy! My poor, dear boy!"

ACT III

THE first question to decide, now that they were penniless, was where they were to live; and Billings told his wife that she would have to decide it. Following the first galvanic rally a reaction threatened;

Mrs. Billings seemed inclined to slump into hopeless apathy. "I'll go wherever you say, Mortimer," she answered with a wan smile. "I don't care where we live." One cannot be cured overnight, even of imaginary ills and their effects.

"But you've got to care; you've got to say," declared Mortimer firmly. "Haven't I enough on my mind meeting my creditors?"

He seemed almost unkind, and this was so astonishingly unusual that she was on the verge of one of her old hysterical turns, until catching sight of his face working convulsively, and thinking of all he had been through, she straightway stopped thinking about herself. "Poor old Mortimer," she said, patting his arm; "of course, you have enough to do already. I'll attend to my share."

It nearly broke his heart at first to watch her, tired out and distressed, nerving herself to meet the situation with such sweet, pathetic attempts to look cheerful for his sake. He found it more difficult than he had anticipated to break the habit of years; to refrain from sympathizing with her woes, bearing her burdens as well as his own. Sometimes he feared he was overdoing it—she came near going to pieces. He knew how keenly she felt the lack of his solicitude. But he was afraid to be sympathetic; it would make her feel sorry for herself. So he compromised by being very demonstrative and affectionate. He showed her how much he appreciated her pluck and efficiency. Appreciation never hurt anyone. And the result was the difference between making her feel sorry for herself and making her feel pleased with herself. Moreover, it brought them closer together. Already they were lovers again.

The next day she reported that she had the refusal on a charming little flat for light housekeeping down in the quiet part of town known as Chelsea. "It will be so near our work," she said.

"Our work?" asked Mortimer.

She ran and kissed him gayly. "I have decided to be your stenographer, dearie!"

"What!" exclaimed Mortimer in sudden alarm; "the deuce you have!" He might fool his wife; he couldn't his stenographer.

"Don't you *want* me in the office with you? You don't look a bit pleased," she said, with something of the coquetry of former years.

"It would be charming," said Mortimer gallantly; "but I cannot think of letting you do it, my dear, brave girl. Remember, now, Clara."

"Such lighthousekeeping!" she returned. "I can do both; I used to." He should have remembered that. "Mortimer," she insisted sweetly, "I simply *must* do something."

"Do fancy work," said Mortimer, "at home."

"But, you see, I never learned fancy work. Besides, it wouldn't pay; but I did learn stenography, and it pays quite well. I was very good at it before I became a librarian."

"My dear," said Mortimer solemnly—this was to be a staggerer—"perhaps we cannot afford even one maid!"

It *was* rather staggering, but she arose smiling. "If we are so poor as all that," she returned cheerfully, "it's all the more reason why I should help you in your work, dear. I'll give up the refusal on the flat and we'll live in a boarding-house."

Billings groaned inwardly. "Clara," he said, becoming desperate, "I wanted to spare you this; but you force me to tell it. Now that I have settled with my creditors, I find I shall not be in a position to employ a stenographer, for I myself am only to be a clerk, a poor clerk, Clara, in the very firm which still bears my name."

"Poor old Mortimer," she returned sympathetically; "then I'm sure they'll give your wife a clerkship, too. I'll appeal to them myself."

Mortimer mopped his genuinely beaded brow. "Wait until to-morrow," he begged, playing for time. "And don't forget, we're to say nothing about the failure to anyone." He had explained to her, rather vaguely perhaps, that it was "one of those quiet failures" which the newspapers know nothing about. His partners were his chief creditors, and he had "quietly" assigned everything to them. "And the change in our scale of living—I'm telling everyone that it is merely another of your fads, my dear—the simple life."

But Mortimer was beginning to think it would not be very simple for him. A dual life never is.

That afternoon he was very late in getting home. "Well," he said, feeling better, "I have come to terms with my employers,"

and then broke the sad news that it was out of the question, with the salary they heartlessly offered, to live in the city even most simply. "So," he went on cheerfully, "I have secured a small house in a Connecticut village at the extreme edge of the commuters' zone. That will keep you out there—in the sunshine and the flowers."

"Poor old Mortimer!" she replied, beaming upon him; "I see how hard it is for you to tell me these things. It's so brave of you to pretend to like it! But you mustn't be discouraged. Whatever happens, we have each other. Together we can meet poverty bravely." She looked very sweet and courageous as she said it. Each added blow only seemed to make her stronger, like beating molten metal.

She did not like to worry him about it, but how was she to look after the housekeeping and go back and forth to the city every day? For she was now more than ever determined to get some kind of employment—in a shop, if necessary. And think of the late hours! "You ought to have consulted me first, Mortimer," she said, a little hurt.

"But this was such an exceptional bargain, and it wouldn't wait," he improvised easily, and showed her the real-estate broker's photographs of a charming little vine-clad cottage with plenty of ground around it.

"What is the rent?" she inquired with alarm.

"The rent? How do you mean—by the month or the year?"

"By whatever arrangement you made," she demanded, irritatingly practical.

Now, unfortunately, Billings had been in too much of a hurry to ask his secretary about this detail; so he said at a guess: "Thirty-five dollars a month; aren't we lucky?"

She shook her head grimly. "We can't afford it, my dear,"

"Oh, yes, we can, because you are going to help pay for it. There's a Carnegie library out there, and they're looking for an assistant librarian. A friend of mine has secured the job for you!" That is, Mortimer's secretary had arranged to send the present incumbent abroad with full salary and expenses paid. "What do you think of that?"

There was an interlude of rejoicing. "Am I really going to help you?" she ex-

claimed girlishly. "Oh, I haven't been so happy since I don't know when!"

"Since your mother died," thought Mortimer; but he didn't say so.

"What is the salary?" she inquired suddenly.

Confound this practicality. He might be able to keep her in the dark as to the real rent, whatever it proved to be, but as to her own salary—Mortimer had to confess that he had forgotten to ask about the salary. At which his wife gave him an anxious look. He had been through a great deal lately—perhaps he was breaking down; she thought of taking him around to see Dr. Sharpe. "You see this friend of mine," Mortimer was explaining glibly, "was in such a hurry I didn't like to bother him; he's a very important man" (and, indeed, Billings's secretary was a very important man); "beggars can't be choosers, you know. But the salary will be all right, and, as the doctor says, the quiet, regular work will be better for your——" Then he stopped abruptly, for the doctor had expressly forbidden him to remind her of her nerves.

But Billings needn't have worried about that. "Mortimer," she cried, approaching him solicitously, "what were you doing at the doctor's?" She gave him a searching look—which, by the way, would have delighted Sharpe, though it did not delight Mortimer at all, for he had to make answer to his wife, and yet obey Sharpe's injunctions. Little beads of sweat again burst out upon his brow—sometimes a sign of nervous exhaustion.

"I knew it! I knew it!" she exclaimed; "you *have* broken down."

"Nonsense," said Mortimer; "I merely dropped in to pay the bill."

"Ah! How much was it, dear?"

"See here, Clara," replied Mortimer, who did not know, "if you don't stop asking these vulgar questions——"

"That means that the bill is enormous!"

"On the contrary," answered her husband, smiling for a reason she did not understand, "I am becoming more and more convinced that Sharpe has undercharged me."

ACT IV

MRS. MORTIMER BILLINGS, President of the Village Improvement Society, Secretary of the Present Era Club, member of the

Public School Board, *et cetera*, and Mrs. Billings's husband, a Wall Street clerk, were walking in the cool of the evening up and down the terrace of the diminutive but dainty formal garden which Mrs. Billings had designed, after library hours, and for which Mrs. Billings's husband had hauled dirt after coming home with the other commuters.

Mrs. Billings's husband had not enjoyed hauling dirt. He tried to get out of it by turning over to his wife the result of a lucky tip on the market kindly given him, she supposed, by one of his employers. But Mrs. Billings insisted that the exercise would do him good, now that he was a clerk on an office stool all day, and quietly kept the money to invest in something "safe"—without consulting her husband. He, poor dear, had ruined himself in speculative stocks, and therefore his opinion in such matters did not amount to much. Not that she loved him the less for it—not at all; he could not help it, poor fellow; it was his "temperament," she explained indulgently, and was the more kind and considerate toward him for his unfortunate weakness. Often she noted a far-away, worried look as he went about his "chores," shaking down the furnace or pumping the water for the tank; and this look meant that he had been losing his earnings in speculation again, and she smiled fondly to think how easy it was for her to see through him; for, like a naughty boy, he only told about his transactions when he happened to make a lucky turn and indulged in some untoward extravagance—such as an electric pump for filling that same bottomless tank, or buying her a new fur-lined coat last winter to walk to the library in. This last she could not forgive, though she loved him for it.

The past year of hardship and economy had drawn them closer together than ever. They were very loving, and life was undoubtedly sweet and all that; but just the same, it was an awful bore to Mortimer. He was sick of the simple life. There was nothing in it when you weren't obliged to lead it. He was tired of getting up at dawn and getting indigestion rushing for the 7.55. He was becoming nervous and unstrung from the strain of keeping up the elaborate deception. He had cured his wife, but sometimes believed he was going to take her place as a nervous wreck.

Yet he did not dare to tell her, for even if

she might forgive him, she would probably relapse. Sharpe said so; and then all this foolish year would have been endured in vain. He didn't know what to do, but he knew he would soon do something. His wife was having the time of her life, but he was getting desperate. It was no longer funny; no joke can last a year, especially such a practical one, which turns upon one's self like a boomerang. It no longer amused him to be known—in the village—as his own namesake and nephew and employee. "Humph! Nothing but a poor relation of Billings, the banker—no reason for being so stiff and formal," was the verdict at the bridge club.

"Yes; Fred says Mrs. Billings's husband wears his mustache that queer way just because his uncle does," contributed the local doctor's wife; "likes to be taken for his uncle." This was rather rubbing it in.

"Well, he *does* look like the Mortimer Billings—I've seen his pictures in the papers," said a prominent member of the Present Era Club.

"My dear," this bending nearer, "Charles says he's often seen him leaving the Grand Central in a *cab*! and that sweet wife of his working all day long to help support him! He ought to be ashamed." They all agreed on this—and for that matter, Mortimer was ashamed.

"And you know, my dear, if it hadn't been for his rich uncle she wouldn't have this position in the library. I guess old Billings wanted to get them out of town out of the way," etc., *ad libitum*. For the story of the ex-assistant librarian's free trip to Europe had, of course, come out, being hardly of the nature to stay in.

Fortunately, the local ladies were too tactful to let Mrs. Billings know that they were aware of the secret. She, as has been intimated, was as much beloved as she was respected, notwithstanding the fact that she was by way of running the whole town—as well as her husband. Her husband was as proud of her as ever, but he no longer enjoyed being known as Mrs. Billings's husband. "Ah, glad to meet Mrs. Billings's husband," the village pastor said, with a kind smile, when Mrs. Billings had insisted upon dragging him into "the life" of the place. "Your uncle has sent a check for the new organ; I'm sure it would gratify *him* to hear of your identifying yourself with our church

work." It was practically a command. Billings, to keep up the bluff, had to obey. So the check which he had hoped would let him out only pulled him in. The way of the liar is hard.

All this had made excellent stories to regale his intimates with at luncheon in town—for a while. But he no longer told them. When giped with questions about the simple life he merely wore the far-away look which troubled his wife sometimes, making her the more solicitous and motherly.

It was the incident of the cigars which brought on the climax—a small thing in itself, but so was the straw which broke the camel's back. She had been worrying again about his extravagance, and Mortimer took her gentle reproof guiltily—for how else could he take it? So when a little later she asked him in a shy, embarrassed manner, "Mortimer, dear, would you mind telling me how much you pay for your cigars?" he was naturally frightened, for his special importation of cigars—famous among his friends—was about the only thing he had left of his former mode of life, the one comfort he could quietly keep up on the old scale, without being found out in this awful nightmare of simplicity. To him they were not a luxury, but now more than ever a necessity, which he would not abandon without a fight. Therefore, "Five cents, my dear," he said hastily, thus adding one more to the long list of lies which were becoming easier to tell and harder to remember every day. His wife made no comment, but one afternoon a week later, with the conscious manner of one sure to please, regardless of expense, she said, "Your birthday, dear," and presented him with a box of ten-cent cigars. "I remember how you used to enjoy a good smoke," she added fondly.

"Oh, you should not have done this," he said, kissing her while he groaned inwardly.

"Don't worry, dear boy," she said, reassuringly practical, "you see I made a little extra money last month writing an article for the *All Outdoors* magazine on 'How to Build an Italian Garden for \$46.45.' Enjoy your cigars with a free mind, dearest."

So as they paced slowly up and down the small terrace this afternoon Mortimer was pathetically puffing one of his wife's dusty cigars, and coming to an important decision.

"Clara," he said with the same manner as when he announced his failure a year ago, "I have something to tell you."

She turned and patted his arm with the same maternal instinct of protection as on that other occasion, but this time with poise, strength, and confidence. "Out with it, dearie. I've been expecting it for weeks. I have watched your poor troubled eyes. I knew it had to come sooner or later. But don't worry, dearest; I have an option on the old White farm. We'll go into flower raising. There, there, dearie, don't interrupt. I've always saved at least twenty-five per cent. of my housekeeping money and seventy-five per cent. of my salary—besides the sums I kept you from speculating with, you poor dear boy. I now know a lot about flowers, and you, dear," she concluded comfortingly, "you can be my foreman!"

Mortimer Billings, the great financier, turned and confronted his wife with a look she had never seen since he had become known as "Mrs. Billings's husband."

"Your foreman, eh?" he snapped out, hurling the bitter cigar stub among the flowers. "Well, I guess I *won't* be your foreman—not if I know myself. I've had enough of this; I can't stand any more. You're a success; you think I'm a failure—'Poor old Mortimer, poor old dub! Let's

be sorry for him.' Well, here's where you can stop being sorry for *me*! I can't help it, whether it hurts you or not—it's *killing* me! Besides, it's all very nice, your affection, your tenderness, your solicitude; but you admire success, and I want your admiration, not merely your love."

"Mortimer! why are you so excited? Do you mean you have *not* failed again?"

"Again? Again! I never did fail, and by heavens, I never will—no matter what the doctor says. I'm worth double what I was last year, and I'm glad of it. I suppose you'll have a relapse, but that's the truth. I played a trick on you—do what you please about it."

What she pleased, when at last she took it in, need not be recorded here. She did admire success, it seems.

"And we'll buy the White farm—without any mortgage!" she cried.

"Yes; and we'll buy back the town house, too."

"No, Mortimer, if you don't mind,"—there was more respect in her tone now—"not for me."

"But why not?"

"Will you promise not to tell?"

He promised. She looked down at the grass beneath their feet. "Because," she said, hiding her face in his coat, "the city is no place for children."